

FINE4002:
Japan: Perspectives in Asian art

Spring 2017

Final Paper

Ran as Rhetoric: Reconsideration of Dutch-
Japanese Interactions in Edo period

Name: Tong Yijia
University ID: 3035087083
Major: Fine Arts and Japanese Studies

Submission Date: May 15, 2017

Timon Screech's book-length publication, *The Western Scientific Gaze and Popular Imagery in Later Edo Japan: The Lens within the Heart* has expanded the scope of Edo art history for art historians. In this book, Screech explored previously understudied materials on the visual history of *Rangaku* 蘭学 (Dutch studies), including *kibyōshi* 黄表紙 (popular illustrated picture books) and medical illustrations. He successfully framed his explorations on these new materials around the two important themes of Edo art history, the encounter with the Dutch and constructs of vision. Before Screech, earlier historians typically have recognized the Dutch-Japanese encounter as waves of emulation and assimilation to Western civilization and visual meter. As Foucault has pointed out, traditional history has viewed historical events as continuous and linear. With such a precaution in mind, earlier historians might have operated with the idea of total westernization of Meiji (1868-1912) period in mind and have mistaken the artistic hybridity during Tokugawa (1603-1868) Japan as a starting point of later westernization process. Tokugawa Japanese artistic experiments with European subject matters and medium differed in purpose and nature than Meiji westernized cultural products. Such myth was discredited with the publication of *The Western Scientific Gaze*.

Screech's reconsideration on *Rangaku* is best epitomized in Chapter Six: "The Eye and the Lens." In this chapter, Screech has argued that the Dutch and Dutch scientific gaze existed in Tokugawa consciousness as a rhetoric and strategy instead of present-day concepts, making the Euro-Japanese encounter a process of cooptation instead of "assimilation." In this process, Japanese artists reinvented the European subject matters and concepts for their own use and purposes. To be precise, artists have employed the rhetorical value of *Ran* or the Dutch in criticizing contemporary affairs. Similarly, merchants utilized the idea of *Ran* as a marketing scheme. In this

essay, I will argue that Screech has successfully demonstrated that *Ran* was synopsized to an aura of precision and an appeal of exotic curio in the realm of vision and sight. This argument contributed greatly to Japanese art history because it discredited the commonplace myth of *Rangaku* as passive reception of foreign influences and affirmed the Japanese agency in Dutch-Japanese encounter. Before turning to Screech's chapter, I will first provide a general overview of previous studies on *Rangaku* art.

Japanese "Studies of the Dutch (蘭学 *rangaku*)" roughly began with the publication of *Kaitai Shinsho* 解体新書 (1774) by Sugita Genpaku 杉田玄白 (1733-1817). As one of the earliest translations from Dutch-language medical books, it represented two groundbreaking developments in Japanese cultural history.¹ It generated an alternative system for Japanese medicine, which was previously dominated by *Kanpō* 漢方 (Chinese-style) medicine. In addition, it inspired the study of Western languages, science and art in Japan, giving birth to *Rangaku* as a discourse. Although this important theme was explored in depth in the realm of cultural history, it remained understudied, sometimes misunderstood in the context of art history prior to Screech's publication. One of the earliest writing on *Rangaku* art was the 1977 publication *Through Closed Doors: Western Influence on Japanese Art 1639-1853* by Calvin L. French. In his monograph, French highlighted the importance of *Rangaku* in 18th century Japan for the astonishingly profound impact that Western culture exerted on a secluded society.² There are mainly two problems with his work. The premise on which French built his thesis is a myth. The idea that Japan was in a state of isolation

¹ Shigehisa Kuriyama, "Between Mind and Eye: Japanese Anatomy in the Eighteenth Century," In *Paths to Asian Medical Knowledge*, ed. Charles Leslie and Allan Young, 21-43, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 21.

² Calvin L. French, Tadashi Sugase, and Kiichi Usui, *Through Closed Doors: Western Influence on Japanese Art 1639-1853*. (Kobe, Japan: Kobe City Museum of Namban Art, 1977), 2-3.

during Tokugawa period has been discredited. Most scholars have realized that the *sakoku* 鎖国 policy was a special international policy instead of a total state of seclusion.³ Another problem with French's monograph lies in his Eurocentric tone in dealing with the topic of *Rangaku*. He spoke highly of the paintings done in the European manner when explaining the merits of selected artworks. In contrast, the Japanese social-historical background that generated the reinvention of these manners remained understudied. In this approach, French has regard the artistic innovations of *Rangaku* artists only as efforts to assimilate and emulate to Western culture, instead of attempts to expand the scope of Japanese culture. In other words, French has actually employed a Eurocentric tone in dealing with *Rangaku* art.

Another major work on *Rangaku* was *The Japanese Discovery of Europe, 1720-1830* (1969) by Donald Keene. As a devoted Japanologist, Keene made efforts to part ways with the prevalent Eurocentric tone. However, his discussion on *Rangaku* art also touched only the face value of borrowing of styles and techniques. In the nine-page introduction of *Rangaku* art, Keene merely traced Japanese borrowing of European iconography, such as oil painting and the use of perspective and shadows.⁴ Take *The Barrel-makers* for example (Fig. 1). This painting depicts a group of European people making barrels. This subject matter is a highly unusual one if put in the context of contemporary European oil paintings. Such "unusual" choice demonstrates the Japanese curiosity in the West and their initiative in introducing European life to domestic audiences. Keene also commented on Shiba Kōkan 司馬江漢 (1747-1818), a prominent *Rangaku* scholar and painter, stating that his paintings

³ Screech, *The Western Scientific Gaze*, 2.

⁴ Donald Keene, *The Japanese Discovery of Europe, 1720-1830*, (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1969), 61-69.

were more “interesting than beautiful.”⁵ Keene’s limited exploration implied that he has simplified the value *Rangaku* art to no more than stylistic assimilation towards European art. Having taken a brief overview over the field, I will now demonstrate how Screech has unearthed the understudied yet pervasive rhetorical value of *Ran* 蘭 (the Dutch) reinvented by the Japanese in the chapter, “Eyes and Lenses.” In demonstrating Japanese reduction of the Dutch into a rhetorical symbol, Screech implied that in Tokugawa Japanese consciousness, the West existed as fragments instead of contemporary notions with their normative values.⁶ In doing so, he actually clarified to the European readers that these places and people differ from present-day concepts but are constructs of Tokugawa Japanese appropriations.

As I have noted earlier, Tokugawa interpretations of the Western scientific gaze highlighted both the aura of precision and the value as curios. A key innovation of Screech’s argument is that he pointed out the rhetorical value of *Ran* was employed by not only the scholarly world, but also the popular world that constituted of common people in a more pervasive way. *Ran*’s association with precision begins with its novel medicalization of human eye, which was set in motion by *Kaitai Shinsho* in the elite scholarly world. Screech demonstrated in *Kaitai Shinsho*, the anatomy of the eye appeared to be one of the most novel parts to *Rangaku* physicians. The human eye was a completely untouched structure in traditional *Kanpō* 漢方 anatomical charts. Thus the visual inspection of human eye offered a novel way to understand human body. In *Kaitai Shinsho*, the human eye was probed and depicted in the way it had never before been seen (Fig. 2). It was shown within the facial structure, as a separated entity, and then pictorially dissected layer by layer.

⁵ Keene, *The Japanese Discovery of Europe*, 69.

⁶ Screech, *The Western Scientific Gaze*, 2.

Following the exploration of doctor's discussion, Screech then demonstrated the medicalized, scientifically reconsidered human eye soon inspired changes in the art world. He argued that in the port of Nagasaki 長崎, the organ of human eye became the key visual element in the Japanese understanding of the West.⁷ He used Iwasaki Kan'en's 岩崎灌園 (1786-1842) portrait of his friend, German botanist Franz von Siebold (1796-1866), as evidence to support this argument. Being a botanist himself, Kan'en illustrated Siebold also in the conventions of botanical charts (Fig.3). Kan'en captured his friend wearing outlandish European clothes and he made explanatory captions at the blank space next to the illustration for native audiences. Even more interestingly, he drew Siebold's blue sunken eye a second time, placing it on the blank to the left of the figure. Screech commented on this picture that the inclusion of inset pictures within a larger work presented the prominent feature of the specimen.⁸ Meanwhile, he argued that Kan'en equated the mechanics of vision with that of the optical devices. Just as foreign botany, foreigners themselves were also objects to be probed and studied by the scientific gaze for the interest of Japanese population. In doing so, Screech affirmed that *Ran* existed in Tokugawa Japanese consciousness as not only the "other," but also as a symbol of the "other" in building up its proper self.

Apart from facilitating popular understanding of the West, Screech has also suggested that the detached eye inspired a new "objective vision" in popular images and literature, including woodblock prints and illustrated picture books. The scientifically reconsidered human eye manifests in the visual form of a floating eye detached from personality symbolically. It alluded to the assumed independence and

⁷Screech, *The Western Scientific Gaze*, 171.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

precision of Dutch optical instruments.⁹ Such Western claims to objectivity in vision however, met difficulties when translated into Japanese. Screech has pointed out that the sense of objectivity actually had few equivalences in Japanese except for the word “Authenticity (*makoto* 誠)”.¹⁰ It is a quality that emphasizes the truthfulness based on faithfulness towards another person, usually higher in status. This means *makoto* is restrained by moral dedication and personal sentiment in a social context. In pointing out this lack of equivalence, Screech has demonstrated that the Western quality of “objectivity” has been translated into indigenous notion of social authenticity in popular images and literature. In pointing out this diverted translation, Screech has affirmed the agency of Tokugawa people to invent new meanings for Western concepts. This is consistent with Homi Bhabha’s idea that the pre-modern cross-cultural interaction between the colonists and the colonized should be seen as choice of refashioning instead of catachresis, which implies that agency of cross-cultural interaction belongs to the colonist.¹¹ The affirmation of agency manifests in the reconsideration of the cultural encounter as “cooptation”, a process of active reinvention, instead of passive “influence.”

Jippensha Ikku 十返舎一九 (1765 - 1831) employed the curious foreign depiction of a detached eye for his humorous writing of popular experience. He wrote a *kibyōshi* 黄表紙 (illustrated picture book) in 1797 titled *Night View, Far off and under a Hat* (夜目遠目笠の内 *Yome tōme kasa no uchi*). In this illustrated book, Ikku contrasted the scientific depiction of a detached eye (as shown in *Rangaku* anatomical charts) with the subjective use of this organ by people in actual life. Screech explained that the title refers to a proverb on three criteria for a beautiful woman. She

⁹ Ibid., 172.

¹⁰ Screech, *The Western Scientific Gaze*, 172.

¹¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. (London: Routledge, 1994), 346.

must look pretty at night, from a distance and half-hidden under a hat.¹² By choosing this title, Ikku warned the readers that this old expression has implied that loveliness is a concept under blocked vision. He proposed that people should look with a vision to be able to see beneath the surface, namely “under the hat, through the dark, or faraway”. This vision is what Ikku calls “heart’s eyes (*kokoro no me* 心の目).”

Ikku believed that these “heart’s eyes” will be able to intrude upon the empirical vision with its annotation of precision. Visually, Ikku painted the heart’s eyes as an important pictorial device employed through out his illustrated picture book. The hearts’ eyes appeared in the illustrations as anthropomorphic creatures that usually wear the same clothing with the owners. With their wide-open eyes that took up the entire area of their faces, hearts’ eyes’ actions truthfully reveal the sincere intention of the represented characters. In the first scene, the illustration depicts a street entertainer performing his fire-eating tricks in front of a large crowd (Fig. 4). In the foreground where his cheating could be exposed, the showman’s heart’s eyes, illustrated as detached, wide-open eyes, blocked the vision of the audience. Similarly in the back, the audience’s heart’s eyes were lurking so that they could leave as soon as the entertainer pulled out his collection bag for money.

The humorous employment of European detached eye was also Ikku’s refashioning of the foreign pictorial device, attributing the “heart’s eyes” with better precision than *Rangaku* eyes. The detached eye was merely an object for Japanese observation, in Kan’en’s portrait of his German friend. In contrast, Ikku managed to associate the object of an detached eye with the indigenous concept of *makoto* 誠 (authenticity), which includes the social merits of sincerity and truthfulness. The

¹² Screech, *The Western Scientific Gaze*, 176.

detached eye was independent from the social ties and bonds (*kizuna* 絆) in society. In this way they could operate as a “precise vision” without harm.

Another realm that was commonly linked with the idea of “precise vision” is physiognomy. Screech’s exploration of this idea has revealed that this system of human analysis also reinvented *Ran*’s aura of precision for better assessment. *Ukiyo-e* artist Kitagawa Utamaro 喜多川歌麿 (1753-1806), also a physiognomy enthusiast used the motif of large magnifying glasses to endorse the credibility of his assessment of different types of women. In Fig. 5, the magnifying glasses were prominently drawn in the picture. In *Bijin Go Menso* 美人五面相 (*Five Physiognomies of Beauties*), inside the lenses is written the series title. This series constitutes of five types of women that are deemed as lovely women by Utamaro, including joyfulness (*ureshisō* うれし相), sincerity (*jitsugaarisō* 実があり相), cuteness (*kawaisō* かわい相), goodness (*yokisō* よき相) and contentedness (*umansō* う満相). However, these traits of loveliness can be difficult to see and differentiate, as they are only vague generalizations.

The print *Kiseru o Motsu Onna* 煙管を持つ女 (*Woman Holding a Pipe*), also by Utamaro, attests to these confusing standards of categorization. According to the description on the left side of the print, this lady falls into the categories of sincerity. However, the pipe-holding position was a common one for beautiful women in Edo woodblock prints. She seems to fall into the category of sincere beauty for no apparent reason. In order to support this assessment, Utamaro depicted a large magnifying glass, granting the image an aura of precision. This Western optical instrument was known in late Tokugawa Japan as *tengan-kyō* 天眼鏡, which literally

means “heaven’s eyes glasses.” This evocative term associates its physical property of precision with ability of omnipotent heaven.

In this process, Utamaro has refashioned the use of large magnifying glasses. As a scientific optical instrument, large magnifying glasses must be present in the process of observation within Dutch tradition. However, Utamaro did not actually employ the optical instrument during his observation of women. Instead, he took advantage of its connotation of heavenly precision as a pictorial device to assert his claim that the woman was indeed, sincere. In including this image in his monograph, Screech further enlarged the scope of Japanese invention on the idea of *Ran*.

The aura of precision was perhaps best manifested by the use of microscopes. Arriving in the early 18th century, microscopes brought inspiring novel visions to Tokugawa Japanese. Unlike a personal item like glasses, microscopes were strictly used in scientific observations within the Dutch tradition, which the Rangaku scholars were aware of. In the 1787 publication of *Kōmō zatsuwa* 紅毛雑話 (A Miscellany on the Red-Hairs), Shiba Kōkan has produced a series of illustrations of insects observed under the microscope (Fig. 6). These images depict the metamorphosing processes of ants and mosquitos from eggs to larvae then to adult insects. Accompanied with captions that explain the process to the native readers, these images allude to the Kan’en’s scientific portrait of Franz von Siebold. Similar to the motif of detached eye, the scientific observation of insects also generated a wave of refashioning in the popular world. The gaze into the microscopic world did not undermine established beliefs. On the contrary, Timon Screech has demonstrated that novel visual experience of enlarged images offered new ways to affirm and justify some of the pre-existing concerns in Edo society. He used the reinterpretation of a well-known Daoist story to prove this point. In Zhuangzi 莊子 (369-286 BC) it was written that a

secluded gentleman once persuaded King Yong of Wei not to be persistent on an area of land with a parable of a battle on snail horns. The wise man told the king that there are two countries on each one of the horns of a snail, and they fought with each other over their lands on the snail horn and cost many lives of soldiers. Through the implication of scales, the wise man successfully talked the king out of the fight by implying the vanity of battling over lands.¹³

This parable was popular in Edo period Japan, and the import of microscope help with finding visual evidence for this Daoist parable. Morishima Chūryō 森島中良 (1756-1810), a *Rangaku* enthusiast who collaborated with Kōkan in writing *Kōmō zatsuwa* put a pair of snail horns under the microscope and searched for the two imaginary nations. He wrote later in his book that: “What I say is not just Chinese stuff and nonsense, as anyone who has used the instrument can attest.”¹⁴ His observation inspired other intellectuals to affirm. Nakai Riken 中井履軒 (1732-1817), another *Rangaku* scholar later endorsed Chūryō’s findings in saying: “now we know that Zhuangzi spoke the very truth.”¹⁵ The refashioned use of microscope attests to the idea of Michel Foucault that knowledge is fluid.¹⁶ The development of Western optical science resulted in different consequences as it was imported to Japan. With this discontinuity in mind, we can say that the *Rangaku* scholars only looked for what was constructed for them to observe within a system that they were trained within.

Apart from associations with the aura of precision, Screech argued that the appeal of *Ran* to Tokugawa Japanese also lies in its status as the ‘other.’ In the subsection of spectacles, Screech examined visual cultures regarding this prevalent

¹³ Screech, *The Western Scientific Gaze*, 194.

¹⁴ Screech, *The Western Scientific Gaze*, 195.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972), 4-5.

personal optical instrument. Glasses had been imported from the West to Japan since before the 16th century. These imported glasses were then distributed through a network of urban shops or peddlers in the countryside. In Edo, there appeared specialized glasses shop near Asakusa called *Maruno-ya* in the eighteenth century.¹⁷ At this time, people were even able to manufacture some minor parts of glasses domestically.¹⁸ Despite this, most retailers of glasses still used the curio value of the *Ran* (Dutchness) to appeal to the customers. Thus it can be concluded that Tokugawa people actually have simplified the idea of *Ran* to a tactic or rhetoric for their own handiness. During this process, Dutchness was more of a Tokugawa Japanese appropriation than present-day concepts. The Tokugawa merchants developed great interest in *Ran* out of monetary reason. They publicized their products with the curio value of foreign products, even though glasses were no longer novel imported goods during the eighteenth century. Under such circumstances, *Ran* existed in the Tokugawa understanding as a tool of the merchants' marketing campaign. In order to gain even more profits, the retailers invented non-existent, brand-new functions of this Dutch optical instrument. This phenomena was captured and mocked in a 1790 illustrated book titled *Great Wealth Made through the Virtue of Glasses* (*Sakaemasu megane no toku* 栄増目鏡の徳) (Fig. 7). This picture book tells a story of a self-made businessman Gyōemon 暁右衛門 who moved from the countryside to Edo and made a fortune selling glasses. After he became affluent, Gyōemon went on to invent new types of glasses for special visual experience. In this scene, Gyōemon is showing one of his samurai clients his invention of "mixed lenses." These glasses are a combination of microscope and telescope that enable the audience to assess both the faraway and the miniature within a single gaze. In the advertisements at the right, we

¹⁷ Screech, *The Western Scientific Gaze*, 176.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

see a list of Gyōemon's inventions. "Literacy glasses (*Nōsho megane* 能書目鏡)" are invented for the sake of people who do not know how to write. They were glasses mashed up with old books. Similarly, "Scholar glasses (*Gakusha megane* 学者目鏡)" were publicized to be able to help the illiterate people with reading. Another interesting type of glasses from Gyōemon's invention is the Red-fur glasses (*kōmō megane* 紅毛目鏡). In Tokugawa Japan, the term Red-fur referred specifically to the Dutch. This advertisement captured both the marketing value of the idea of *Ran* and the Japanese refashioning of the glasses. Despite being ridiculous, Screech has demonstrated the Edo realization in spectacles' ability to increase vision through this story.

Screech's contributed greatly to the visual history of Euro-Japanese interactions. His explorations on these under-valued materials have discredited the colonialism-intruded myth regarding the pre-modern cross-cultural interaction, which alludes to Homi Bhabha's idea on hybrid art.¹⁹ Screech reclaimed the above-discussed hybrid visual materials as an active choice of refashioning instead of catachresis. Meanwhile, he established an understanding that Dutchness existed as a source of cooptation instead of passive influence in Tokugawa consciousness. By unearthing the understudied materials of medical illustrations and illustrated picture books, Screech has substantially discredited the myth of *Rangaku* art as products of "Western influence" as French has put it. *The Western Scientific Gaze* has successfully expanded the scope of vision of Edo art history and for art historians.

¹⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. (London: Routledge, 1994), 346.

Bibliography

- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, London: Tavistock Publications, 1972.
- French, Calvin L., Tadashi Sugase, and Kiichi Usui. *Through Closed Doors: Western Influence on Japanese Art 1639-1853*. Kobe, Japan: Kobe City Museum of Namban Art, 1977.
- Keene, Donald. *The Japanese Discovery of Europe, 1720-1830*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1969.
- Kuriyama, Shigehisa. "Between Mind and Eye: Japanese Anatomy in the Eighteenth Century." In *Paths to Asian Medical Knowledge*, ed. Charles Leslie and Allan Young, 21-43. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- Screech, Timon. *The Western Scientific Gaze and Popular Imagery in Later Edo Japan: the Lens within the Heart*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.



Fig.1. Shiba Kōkan 司馬江漢 (1747-1818), *The Barrel-makers*, 1789-1801, 47.5×59.3cm, ink and color on silk, Tokyo: Tokyo National Museum.

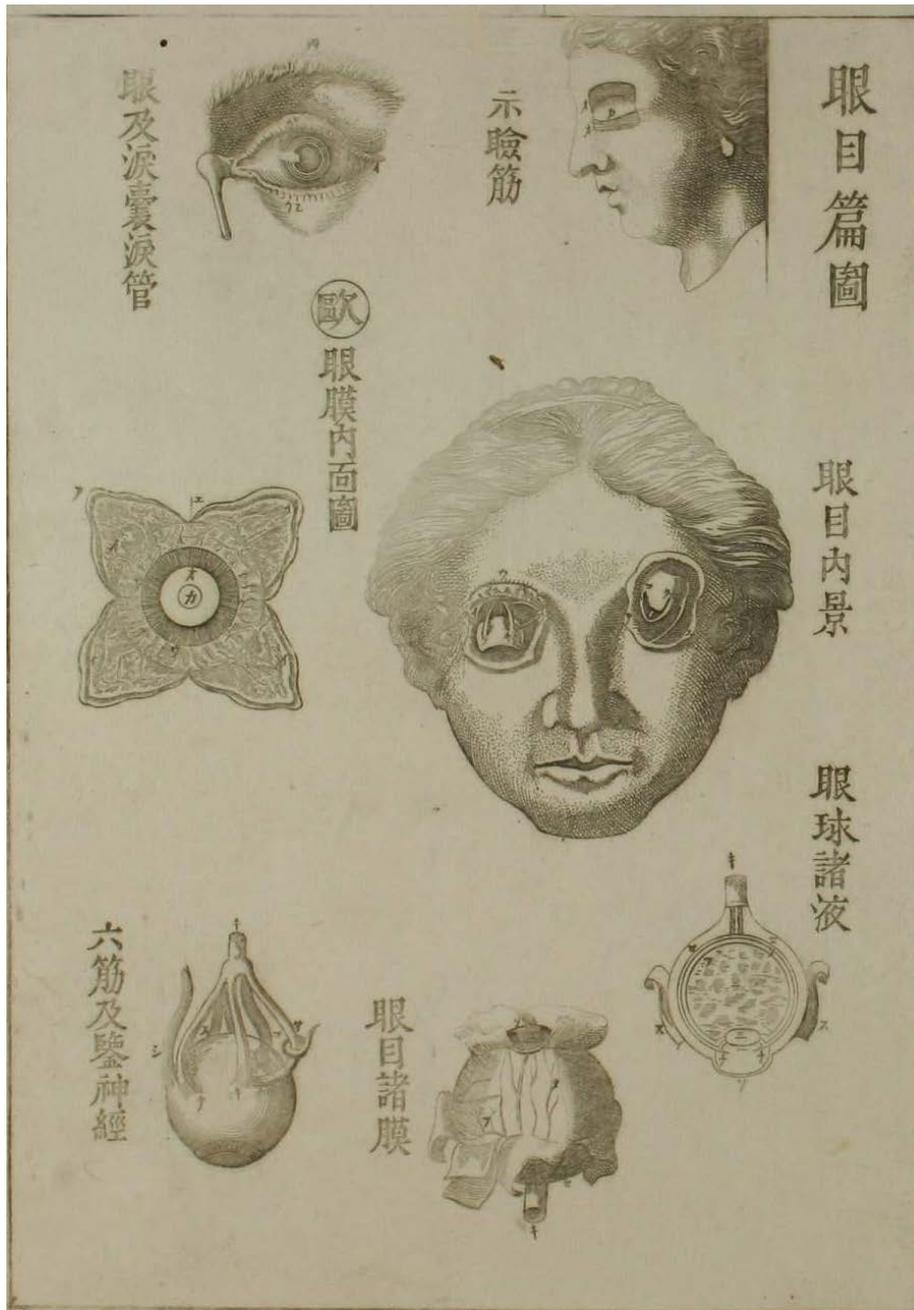


Fig.2. Odano Naotake 小田野直武 (1750-1780), *The Eye*, from Sugita Genpaku 杉田玄白 (et al. trans.), *Kaitai shinsho* 解体新書, 1774, Tokyo: Waseda University Library.



Fig.3. Iwasaki Kan'en 岩崎灌園, *Franz von Siebold*, hanging scroll, 1826, Tokyo: National Diet Library.



Fig.4. Jippensha Ikku 十返舎一九 (1765 - 1831), from his *Night View, Far off and under a Hat* (夜目遠目笠の内 *Yome tōme kasa no uchi*), 1797, Tokyo: Waseda University Library.



Fig. 5. Kitagawa Utamaro 喜多川歌麿 (1753-1806), *Kiseru o Motsu Onna* 煙管を持つ女 (*Woman Holding a Pipe*), from the series *Bijin Go Menso* 美人五面相 (*Five Physiognomies of Beauties*), color woodblock print, c. 1800, 37.465 cm x 25.7175 cm, Massachusetts: Mount Holyoke College Art Museum.

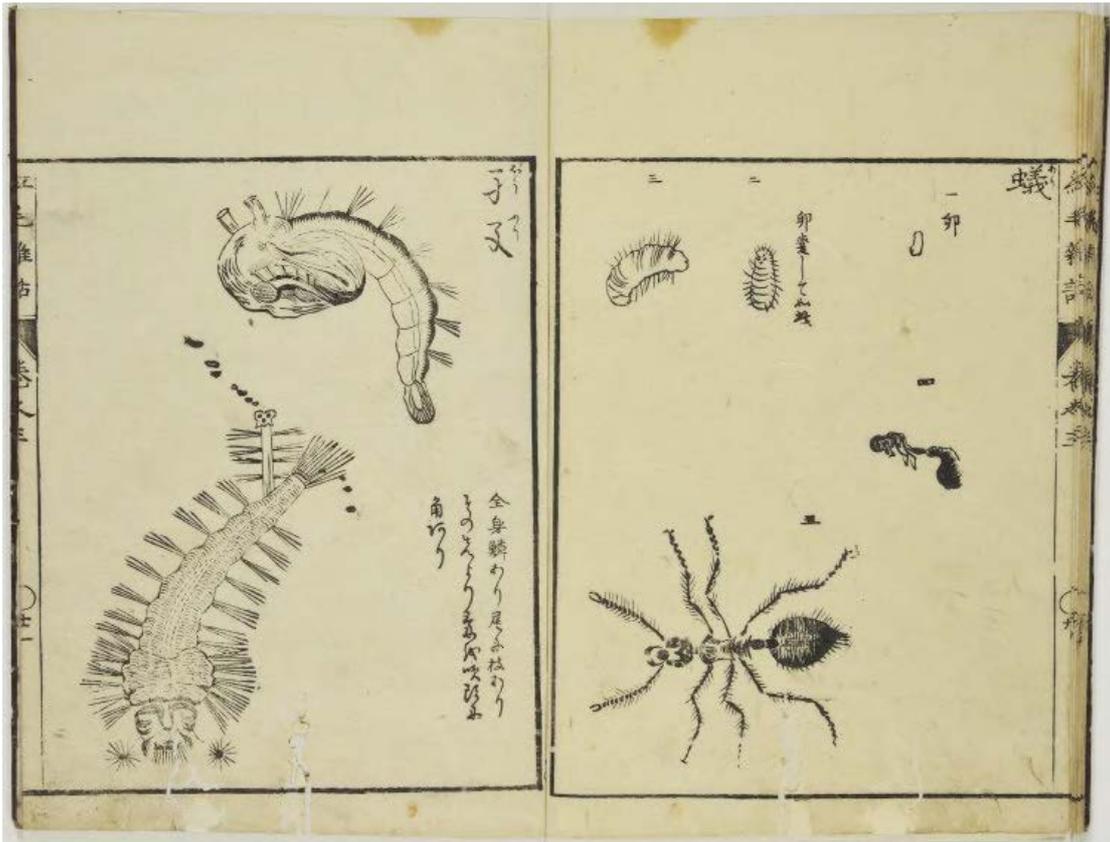


Fig. 6. Shiba Kōkan 司馬江漢, *Ants and Mosquito Larvae*, from *Morishima Chūryō*, from *Kōmō zatsuwa* 紅毛雜話 (A Miscellany on the Red-Hairs), 1787. London: The British Museum.



Fig. 7. Kitao Masayoshi 北尾政美, from *Koikawa Yukimachi* 恋川行町, *Sakaemasu megano no toku* 栄増目鏡の徳 (*Great Wealth Made through the Virtue of Glasses*), 1790, Tokyo: Waseda University Library.